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Popes Benedict XVI and Francis on the Sexual Abuse of Minors: Ecclesiological Perspectives

*Mariusz Biliniewicz**

Introduction

The wound inflicted by the clerical sexual abuse scandal and its cover-up runs so deep that it is sometimes deemed impossible to talk about the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century in a credible way without making at least some reference to this problem.¹ This opinion is seemingly partially shared by current and previous pontiffs, who, on many occasions and in various contexts, have touched upon this issue. In the many interventions in which Benedict XVI and Francis have raised this sad topic, they have apologised on behalf of the leaders of the church for the cases of abuse and for the following cover-up. They have offered words of regret and consolation to victims, their families, the entire church and the world, and have promised to do everything possible to prevent it from happening again. Further, they have attempted to identify the causes of the problem to understand how it could have taken place and the actions required to prevent this tragedy from recurring. Their analyses bear signs of similarities and dissimilarities. The purpose of this article is to ask what the church in Australia, and the church in general, can learn from the two popes' approaches to this problem, not only with regard to handling possible future cases of abuse, but also with regard to the general ways of existing as a

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1. For reflection on some important ecclesiological issues stemming from the clerical sexual abuse scandal, see Massimo Faggioli, 'The Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis as a Theological Crisis: Emerging Issues', *Theological Studies* 80, no. 3 (2019): 572–90.

church in the twenty-first century. Behind Francis's and Benedict's conclusions lie their own theologies of the church, which are worth exploring since they contain important lessons and signposts for the church at the beginning of the third millennium.

Pope Benedict XVI is often credited, also by his successor on the Chair of Peter, as the first pope to seriously tackle the problem of sexual abuse of minors in the church.² Benedict has indeed spoken and acted on this topic on various occasions. His most explicit interventions are his Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland (March 2010) and his essay published on 10 April 2019 in the context of the Vatican meeting on the protection of minors in the church on 21–24 February 2019.³ His recent entry into the discussion as Pope Emeritus caused an avalanche of comments about the appropriateness of an intervention by a retired pope who promised not to speak publicly but to lead a life of seclusion and prayer. However, many commentators were concerned not only by the fact of Benedict's involvement, but also by the content of his nearly 6000-word essay. It was sometimes claimed that Benedict's recent intervention made it clear that he did not view the problem in the same way as Pope Francis. Thus, it has been suggested that the two ways the two popes have approached the issue of abuse in the church represent two distinctive, if not rival, ecclesiologies. For example, after the publication of Benedict's essay, originally written with Francis's permission, in *Klerusblatt*, a monthly periodical for clergy in Bavarian dioceses,⁴ Jason Horowitz published an article in the *New York Times* titled 'Duelling Popes? Maybe. Duelling Views in a Divided Church? Definitely'.⁵ The editorial staff of the *National Catholic Reporter* issued a piece titled 'One Pope Is Quite Enough', in which they stated that in light of the February 2019 gathering of heads of episcopal conferences in the Vatican, Benedict's 'interjection ... seemed ... [like] an act of sabotage, intended or not'.⁶ Brian Flanagan expressed concern that the spectre of Benedict's voice might be

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2. See, e.g., Francis's interview with Ferruccio de Bortoli in *Corriere della Sera* on 5 March 2014, English translation available at <https://zenit.org/articles/english-translation-of-pope-francis-corriere-della-sera-interview/>, or his press conference on the return flight from Abu Dhabi to Rome on 5 February 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco_20190205_emiratiarabi-voloritorno.html.
 3. The meeting was called 'The Protection of Minors in the Church' and gathered presidents of the episcopal conferences of the Catholic Church, the heads of the Oriental Catholic Churches, representatives of the Union of Superiors General and the International Union of Superiors General, and members of the Roman Curia and the Council of Cardinals. See <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2019/02/21/190221b.html>.
 4. For an English translation, see Benedict XVI, 'The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse', 10 April 2019, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-benedict-xvi-the-church-and-the-scandal-of-sexual-abuse-59639?fbclid=IwAR0GU2-eq38nOHaR_SmaeaWGD6jxvy-nYX5LllyBUUPZANNpSFsUBbW6TVE.
 5. Jason Horowitz, 'Duelling Popes? Maybe. Duelling Views in a Divided Church? Definitely', *New York Times*, 18 April 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/18/world/europe/pope-francis-benedict-letter-sex-abuse.html>.
 6. NCR Editorial Staff, 'One Pope Is Quite Enough', *National Catholic Reporter*, 22 April 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/editorial-one-pope-quite-enough>.

viewed as an alternative to the papacy of Francis.⁷ Richard A. Spinello perceived in Benedict's text a repudiation of Francis's moral theology,⁸ while Massimo Faggioli complained that '[t]he Ratzinger thesis on sexual abuse in the church constitutes a counter-narrative that directly feeds opposition to Pope Francis and creates confusion about what to do at this dramatic moment'.⁹ While Faggioli was careful not to directly accuse Benedict of creating some kind of premeditated and organised opposition to Francis, he stated that those who resist the Argentinian Pope's innovative agenda and prefer instead to 'flirt with schism' use Benedict to undermine the authority of the current Pontiff, whose reformist orientation they reject.¹⁰

Statements such as these deserve attention and require a response as to whether the two popes' approaches to the abuse scandal really warrant discussion of two different and rival ecclesiologies. While it is beyond the scope of this article to present Francis's and Benedict's ecclesiologies in their full spectra, it is possible nevertheless to provide an overview of the commonalities and differences in their interpretations of the sexual abuse scandal, and the general ecclesiological consequences of these two visions. This is particularly relevant in terms of the lessons that the church in Australia could learn in light of the forthcoming Plenary Council.¹¹

Primary Causes of the Abuse of Minors by Clerics

Regarding the chief cause of the abuse crisis, careful analysis demonstrates little opposition between the two pontiffs. In fact, there seems to be a

7. Flanagan's concern is noted by Chico Harlan and Stefano Pitrelli, 'Ex-Pope Benedict Contradicts Pope Francis in Unusual Intervention on Sexual Abuse', *Washington Post*, 12 April 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/speaking-out-at-this-difficult-hour-a-once-quiet-ex-pope-pens-a-lengthy-letter-on-sexual-abuse/2019/04/11/0ffa162e-5c1a-11e9-a00e-050dc7b82693_story.html.
8. Richard A. Spinello, 'Benedict's Essay Is an Implicit Rebuke of *Amoris Laetitia*', *Crisis Magazine*, 15 May 2019, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2019/benedicts-essay-is-an-implicit-rebuke-of-amoris-laetitia>.
9. Massimo Faggioli, 'Benedict's Untimely Meditation', *Commonweal*, 12 April 2019, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/benedicts-untimely-meditation>.
10. *Ibid.* See also Massimo Faggioli, 'Flirting with Schism', *Commonweal*, 6 September 2018, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/flirting-schism>.
11. For studies on the ecclesiology of Pope Francis see Walter Kasper, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (New York: Paulist, 2015), 37–61; Stella Morra, 'A Faithful People among Peoples: Elements of Fundamental Ecclesiology', in *From the Nail to the Key: The Fundamental Theology of Pope Francis*, ed. Michelina Tenace (Bayswater, VIC: Coventry Press, 2019), 79–92; Massimo Faggioli, *Pope Francis: Tradition in Transition* (New York: Paulist, 2015), 41–84; Robin Ryan, 'Ecclesiological Themes in the Teaching of Pope Francis', *New Theology Review* 27, no. 2 (March 2014): 81–9; Jeffrey S. Kirch, 'A Lived Catholicity: The Ecclesiologies of Pope Francis and Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S.', *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 3, nos. 1–2 (2019): 149–63. Among the many works that address the ecclesiology of Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI, the most comprehensive study available in English is still Maximilian Heinrich Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology: Fundamentals of Ecclesiology with Reference to 'Lumen Gentium'*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005).

harmonious agreement between them in terms of identifying the main source of the problem—which, in both their opinions, is spiritual. In his homily at the concluding Mass of the February 2019 Vatican gathering, Francis devoted the first part of his sermon to placing the phenomenon of abuse in the Catholic Church in a wider context.¹² Without implying any justification for the events, the Pope reminded participants that the evil of sexual abuse of minors is not confined to the church but is a widespread phenomenon found in all kinds of contexts. He recalled that most cases of abuse occur in children’s own homes, neighbourhoods, schools and athletic facilities. In the vast majority of cases, abusers are known to the children and include parents, relatives, husbands of child brides, coaches and teachers. Thus, the ultimate origins of the evil of abuse of minors does not lie in any particular group, organisation or institutional structure. Further, despite some media depictions and popular opinions, sexual abuse is not exclusive to Catholic clergy and religious settings. Empirical research indicates that the Catholic Church is not more prone to the sexual abuse of minors than any other organisation or community that deals with children.

This, of course, does not mean that the church can be excused for failing where others have also failed. It would be an utter betrayal of Christ and his Gospel if Christians were to find comfort in knowing that the moral standards and conduct of their community are no worse than those of any other community. Since the level of expectation is always proportionate to the level of knowledge and grace received (Luke 12:48), the church’s sole and ultimate moral standard should be the perfection to which God himself is calling us (Matt 5:48) and she can never be satisfied with anything less than this. Francis’s point here, however, is that the deepest roots of the phenomenon of abuse are not found within the Catholic Church, but outside her. The principal cause of any abuse, especially that of minors by clerics, is found in *mysterium iniquitatis*, the mystery of evil. The origin of all sins is the fact that as humans, we are fallen, sinful and prone to corruption. As people, we are free moral agents who often use this freedom wrongly, regardless of our religious affiliation or position in the church or society.

The mystery of evil, according to Francis, is manifested today in a particularly ‘brazen, aggressive and destructive’ fashion.¹³ The Pope argued in his homily that ‘empirical explanations alone are not sufficient’ since ‘[t]hey fail to make us grasp the breadth and depth of this tragedy’. Francis warned his listeners against ‘a purely positivistic approach’ that ‘can provide us with a true *explanation* helpful for taking necessary measures, but it is incapable of giving us a *meaning*’.¹⁴ What is required today is both explanation and meaning since

12. Francis, Address at Meeting, ‘The Protection of Minors in the Church’, 24 February 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco_20190224_incontro-protezioneminori-chiusura.html.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

‘[e]xplanation will help us greatly in the operative sphere, but will take us only halfway’. He indicated that only by recognising the importance of the spiritual dimension of the problem and making it a point of departure for any further reflection on the topic can we arrive closer to the truth and the real solution. In a candid and straightforward fashion, for which he is so well known, Pope Francis stated that behind all evil, especially evil as perverse as this one, there is Satan, the devil, the evil one, who in his pride and arrogance considers himself the Lord of the world and who ‘does not spare even the innocence of the little ones’.¹⁵

This diagnosis, which does not excuse the church but moves the discussion from the merely natural to the supernatural level, is not too remote from the diagnosis of Benedict, who has argued that the ultimate cause for this evil is the loss of faith in God and living as if he does not exist. In his April 2019 essay, Benedict reminds his readers that when we lose sight of the ultimate, transcendent reality of God, we fall prey to various forms of relativism that can excuse everything and anything. A world devoid of God lacks spiritual purpose and possesses no objective standard of good or bad. Without God, ‘[p]ower is the only principle. Truth does not count, it actually does not exist’.¹⁶ Benedict’s conclusion is not a surprise to those who know his theology. From his earliest works, Joseph Ratzinger has always argued that losing sight of faith in God is the ultimate cause of all human problems, in both modern times and the past.¹⁷

Are the popes on the same page with regard to identifying the intermediate causes that have allowed the phenomenon of abuse to take place in the church on such a scale? It is sometimes argued that Benedict talks mainly about causes external to the church, while Francis limits himself to reflection on internal causes. In this narrative, it is said that Benedict blames the spirit of the 1960s, the sexual revolution and its infiltration into the church, while Francis blames the clericalism and abuse of power within the church.¹⁸ Authors such as Vito Mancuso¹⁹ and Julie Hanlon Rubio²⁰ believe that by searching for causes of the

15. Ibid.

16. Benedict XVI, ‘Church and Scandal of Sexual Abuse’.

17. According to some, the fact that Benedict’s 2019 interpretation of the main cause of abuse was so predictable is not unproblematic. Matt Malone, ‘Ideological Bias Cannot Taint Our Approach to Sexual Abuse’, *America*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/05/01/ideological-bias-cannot-taint-our-approach-sexual-abuse>, is worried that Benedict seems to have had his answer before he had the question. However, he does not limit his criticism to Benedict, but warns everyone who engages in these conversations about bias and circular reasoning: ‘[I]f the cause of every major ecclesial scandal just happens to be that thing that you hate and have relied against for years, then you should ask yourself whether your view may be biased’. Christopher R. Altieri, ‘The Problem with Benedict’s Essay’, *Catholic World Report*, 13 April 2019, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2019/04/13/the-problem-with-benedicts-essay/>, also does not believe that Benedict’s essay offers anything new in this regard.

18. See, e.g., Massimo Faggioli, ‘Blaming It All on the Sixties: How the Pope Emeritus’s Essay on the Sex Abuse Has Been Weaponized’, *Commonweal* 146, no. 8 (May 2019): 6.

19. Mancuso’s view is noted by Harlan and Pitrelli, ‘Ex-Pope Benedict Contradicts Pope Francis’.

20. Rubio’s view is noted by Joshua J. McElwee, ‘In New Letter, Benedict Blames Clergy Abuse

problem outside the church, Benedict refuses to admit that the church's own corrupted, clerical culture is at least partially to blame for the crimes. According to this opinion, this failure is a result of Benedict's rose-tinted ecclesiology that prevents him from recognising the intra-ecclesial roots of the events. However, on closer examination, it is clear that the reality is not as simple as this and that the Pope Emeritus is much more ecclesio-critical than some of his critics seem to acknowledge.

First, it needs to be noted that generally Benedict does indeed focus on the extra-ecclesial causes of the abuse more than Francis does. In both his Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland and his 2019 essay, Benedict argues that the spirit of the 1960s produced an 'all-out sexual freedom' that 'no longer conceded any norms'²¹ and helped society to shake off previous moral scruples regarding sexuality. He states that in many places, citizens, including young children, were subjected to state-prescribed sexualisation from a very young age. This, coupled with the spirit of moral permissivism and the lack of any ultimate moral norms, often led to progressive moral decay that frequently resulted in violence. In this climate, what had been considered inadmissible and intolerable in the past, including paedophilia, now 'was diagnosed as allowed and appropriate'.²²

However, Benedict's analysis does not stop there and he does not lay all blame for the church's mishandling of the abuse on the 1960s and 'the world' in general. Having provided the general historical and social context, he discusses the church's own faults and mistakes, which indeed can be linked with the general atmosphere of those times, but that also cannot be simply excused by it. He argues that due to the church's own weakness, the spirit of moral permissivism made its way into the Catholic world, including Catholic seminaries in which future priests were educated and formed, and that the church was in fact 'defenceless against these changes in society'. He blames the widespread adoption of the general attitude of moral lenience in the church on the development of moral theologies that moved away from such notions as 'natural law' or 'intrinsically evil acts' and that adopted the principle that 'morality was to be exclusively determined by the purposes of human action' ('the end justifies the means').²³ This was possible due to a misinterpretation of the event of the Second Vatican Council, which, also held in the 1960s, was in many Catholic circles understood as a break with the past and the beginning of a new church that could progress without the unnecessary ballast of previous teachings. The Pope Emeritus laments that a tendency developed among the

on Sexual Revolution, Vatican II Theology', *National Catholic Reporter*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/new-letter-benedict-blames-clergy-abuse-sexual-revolution-vatican-ii-theology>.

21. Benedict XVI, 'Church and Scandal of Sexual Abuse'.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

people of the church, mainly priests and the religious, to adopt ‘ways of thinking and assessing secular realities without sufficient reference to the Gospel’.²⁴

Benedict also highlights particular manifestations of these problems in which the church has failed to act according to her own principles. In his Pastoral Letter to Irish Catholics, he listed:

inadequate procedures for determining the suitability of candidates for the priesthood and the religious life; insufficient human, moral, intellectual and spiritual formation in seminaries and novitiates; a tendency in society to favour the clergy and other authority figures; a misplaced concern for the reputation of the Church and the avoidance of scandal, resulting in failure to apply existing canonical penalties and to safeguard the dignity of every person.²⁵

He also discusses the phenomenon of ‘guarantorism’, which made convictions of accused clergy ‘hardly possible’. He mentions the church’s failure to produce sufficient measures against cases of abuse in the revised *Code of Canon Law* (1983) and complains about faulty procedures for the appointment of bishops since Vatican II. Finally, he discusses the establishment of homosexual cliques in seminaries that have held power and cultivated a culture of clericalism of the worst kind.²⁶

One may or may not agree with all aspects of Benedict’s diagnosis; however, it should not be overlooked that while he does not hide his unreserved devotion to the church, including her institutional dimensions, this devotion does not prevent him from exercising a fair amount of ecclesio-criticism. All the malaises of the institutional church listed above, or the ‘filth’ present in the church about which he talked in his famous 2005 Good Friday Stations of the Cross meditations,²⁷ are hardly noted by someone who is so much in love with the church that he is unable to see her obvious faults.

What also needs to be remembered is that in his 2019 essay Benedict does not attempt to provide a comprehensive and complete study of the phenomenon of sexual abuse of minors by the clergy. His aim was to contribute to the discussion and ‘a new beginning’ by offering ‘one or two remarks’ that would not replace the analyses carried out by others, including Pope Francis and the bishops gathering at the February 2019 Vatican meeting, but that would complement them by situating the problem in a wider context.

24. Benedict XVI, ‘Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland’, 19 March 2010, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland.html.

25. Ibid.

26. Benedict XVI, ‘Church and Scandal of Sexual Abuse’.

27. Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff, ‘Way of the Cross at the Colosseum, Good Friday 2005: Meditations and Prayers by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturg/2005/via_crucis/en/station_09.html.

Two Rival Ecclesiologies?

It is evident that there are some crucial overlaps in both pontiffs' reflection on the problem, primarily with regard to identifying the key cause of the problem, but also with regard to some secondary matters. Does this mean that the two popes essentially present us with the same diagnosis, as Andrea Tornielli suggests,²⁸ and that there are not two ecclesiologies involved after all? This would also be a form of oversimplification that fails to consider the various nuances of the two responses. Benedict and Francis, while agreeing on the essentials, place emphases differently in the way they discuss the causes of the crisis and its possible solutions. Each pope has also individually mentioned factors the other pope has not and by doing so they both offer perspectives that are distinctive and unique.

It is true that without denying the external factors, Francis's analysis focuses mainly on the intra-ecclesial causes of the problem. The reason for this might be that while the church has limited influence on its external surroundings, it has considerable influence on its internal culture and this, according to Francis, is what should be the focus at this time. It might be that the academically inclined Benedict tends to understand and present the problem in all its dimensions and complexities, including both the internal and external factors, while the more pragmatic Francis is inclined to fix problems that, as Pope, he is, or should be, able to fix.

In his interventions concerning the topic of sexual abuse in the church, Francis has devoted significant attention to the existence of a culture of clericalism. He has defined clericalism as replacing, silencing or reducing the people of God to small elites that 'not only nullifies the character of Christians, but also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people'.²⁹ He has warned clerics about 'false, facile and futile forms of triumphalism that would defend spaces rather than initiate processes' and has lamented the 'culture of abuse' that flourishes when 'seeking places of honour ... jealousy, envy and machinations' replace a real conversion to the Gospel.³⁰ He has reminded everyone that Catholic clergy are not a special caste within the church that should be immune to valid criticisms. Further, priests, bishops and religious should not hold a monopoly on occupying important offices and playing key roles in decision-making processes. Francis has recommended a paradigmatic shift in how power is exercised by those in

28. Andrea Tornielli, 'Benedict XVI's Birthday and That "Penitential" Approach That Unites Two Pontificates', *Vatican News*, 15 April 2019, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-04/pope-emeritus-benedict-birthday-penitential-abuse.html>.

29. Francis, 'Letter to the People of God', 20 August 2018, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html.

30. Francis, 'Letter to the Bishops of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops', 1 January 2019, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190101_lettera-vescovi-usa.html.

authority in the church and has warned that without it, the church will remain even more ‘self-referential, self-preserving and defensive, and thus doomed from the start’.³¹

Benedict also makes references to the phenomenon that Francis calls ‘clericalism’; however, his approach is not the same as that of Francis. One of the main differences is the degree of attention that the two popes devote to the question of ecclesial structures and their potential for reform. While Benedict has criticised ‘favouring clergy and authority figures’ in passing,³² he has not elaborated on how the current arrangements of many local churches may help in promoting such unhealthy attitudes. Although he seems aware of the dangers related to the existence of an overly clerical culture, unlike Francis he does not seem to consider it necessary to review the structures of the church to tackle this issue, or at least he has not mentioned this explicitly. If there is a problem with overgrowth of power on the part of the clergy, in the eyes of Benedict it is more a matter of changing attitudes rather than reviewing the organisational frameworks that would help to overcome these difficulties and promote, not just allow, or tolerate, lay involvement.

While Francis has maintained the importance of individual, personal conversion among the people of God, clergy included, he has placed a greater emphasis than has Benedict on the need for better policies and procedures that must accompany the individual conversion of those in authority in the church.³³ He has frequently discussed the importance of greater contribution of lay people in general, and women in particular, to the administration of church-related matters. Benedict has not mentioned such particular issues in his addresses on the abuse crisis or in other contexts.

While the topic of clericalism is not foreign to Ratzinger/Benedict, the most common context in which he discusses the abuse of power by clerics is the context of the liturgy — when celebrants assume rights and privileges they do not have and claim the power to replace the official liturgy of the church with their own inventions.³⁴ Francis does not discuss clericalism in this context and is more focused on the abuses of clerical power in the areas of pastoral care, administration, evangelisation and the general problem of inactive and disengaged laity.

Francis’s accent on the structural problems in the church is much stronger than is Benedict’s in his suggestions that the conversion of hearts can be helped or

31. Ibid.

32. Benedict XVI, ‘Pastoral Letter to Catholics of Ireland’.

33. For more on clericalism and the role of the laity in Francis’s mind, see, e.g., *Evangelii Gaudium*, apostolic exhortation, 24 November, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, nn. 102–4.

34. For more on this see Mariusz Biliniewicz, *The Liturgical Vision of Pope Benedict XVI: A Theological Inquiry* (Oxford, UK: Peter Lang, 2013), 94–6.

hindered by ecclesial operational frameworks.³⁵ He seems to understand these structures as far more flexible and changeable than Benedict does. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis mentions that certain ecclesial structures can hamper efforts at evangelisation (n. 26), that structures should be suitably channelled and renewed today (n. 27), pastorally converted (n. 32) and rethought (n. 33). He complains that some Catholics lack a sense of belonging to the church due to unnecessary administrative and structural obstacles (n. 63). Although these emphases are not irreconcilable with Benedict's insistence on the need of personal conversion of church office holders, they do give Francis's teaching a slightly different flavour.³⁶

Conversely, Benedict devotes considerable attention to what he considers a collapse of moral theology in the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council, or to the general misunderstanding of the council itself. Francis, however, does not seem overly concerned with what his predecessor considers to be a crisis in post-conciliar Catholic theology, liturgy, catechesis or pastoral practice. In fact, his praises of certain moral theologians who, after the council, did not always see eye to eye with the magisterium (e.g., Bernard Häring),³⁷ his apparent lack of any great enthusiasm towards John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor* and its teaching on moral theology,³⁸ and his embrace of greater pluralism in moral theology in general, including his arguable openness to certain moderate versions of proportionalism,³⁹ place him at odds with Benedict, for whom the

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35. See, e.g., *Evangelii Gaudium*, nn. 25–33, where Francis discusses the conversion of the papacy and the whole church, including the review of the church's current administrative structures. For more on this, see Catherine Clifford, 'Pope Francis' Call for the Conversion of the Church in our Time', *Australian eJournal of Theology* 21, no. 1 (April 2015), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004319165_011.
36. Bradford E. Hinze, 'The Ecclesiology of Pope Francis and the Future of the Church in Africa', *Journal of Global Catholicism* 2, no. 1 (December 2017): 6–33; 'while he acknowledges the personal intentional sources of sin in the Church (as was prominent in John Paul II's writings, reflecting his training in philosophical phenomenology) and affirms the importance of intentionality, Francis also makes room for unconscious and unintentional dimensions that are operative in the Church's social practices and structures, and this reveals the impact of the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM) going back to the General Conference of Medellín', 20. Heinze opines that 'Pope Francis offers resources for the doctrine of social sin and institutional sin, and particularly the sinfulness of the Church, that exceed those developed by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI', 22. On 'pastoral conversion' of the institutional church, see also Keith Lemna and David H. Delaney, 'Three Pathways into the Theological Mind of Pope Francis', *Nova et Vetera*, Eng. ed. 12, no. 1 (2014): 25–56, at 41–2.
37. Pope Francis and Antonio Spadaro, *Open to God: Open to the World* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), 97.
38. This encyclical of John Paul II on moral theology has not been mentioned in any major documents of this pontificate, even those that deal quite specifically with moral matters (e.g., *Amoris Laetitia*, from 2016).
39. See Thomas Berg, 'The Moral Theory that Failed—But Is Now Back in Fashion', *Catholic Herald*, 17 October 2019, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/magazine/the-moral-theory-that-failed-but-is-now-back-in-fashion/>; Vincent Twomey, 'Amoris Laetitia and the Chasm in Modern Moral Theology', *Catholic World Report*, 1 September 2017, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2017/09/01/amoris-laetitia-and-the-chasm-in-modern-moral-theology/>; Christopher O. Tollefsen, 'What Is Legalism?', *Public Discourse*, 5 April 2017, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2017/04/18930/>; Spinello, 'Benedict's Essay'.

lack of faithfulness to the moral teaching of the magisterium was an important element of building the background for the abuse. Further, Benedict links not only the abuse crisis, but every other crisis he has identified in the contemporary church, with the liturgy and losing God from sight, even in Christian worship. In the last part of his April 2019 essay, he discusses the lack of reverence towards the sacrament of the Eucharist as an important contributing factor. Francis does not seem to recognise the existence of any evident link here and certainly does not share either Benedict's liturgical sensibilities or his contempt for aspects of post-Vatican II liturgical reform.

These variances between the two popes make it possible to talk about a certain theological pluralism among the two popes, perhaps even two different ecclesiologies. However, these ecclesiologies, while diverse, do not have to be considered rival, competitive or mutually exclusive, as has been suggested by authors mentioned previously. On the contrary, this ecclesial and theological pluralism can be an example of a diversity that is not disintegrative or harmful for the unity of the church, but that can be stimulating and fruitful. No one theology, of either the church or any other reality, is self-sufficient and complete. As with any work of human hands (or minds), it always needs to be accompanied by other opinions to play its part of shedding more light on the mystery upon which it reflects.

As with all theologies, one could of course identify certain weaknesses in the ecclesiology of each pontiff in this regard and point to certain shortcomings and oversimplifications. For example, Benedict's insistence on the role of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and its influence on the church overlooks the fact that sexual abuse was present in the church well before the 1960s. Further, it was taking place not only in the 'Western world' that was permeated by the corrupted culture of consumerism, but also in countries that did not experience the upheaval of the bourgeois mentality of hedonism and postmodern decadence. The historical nature of abuse in Catholic institutions is a topic for further historical research; however, even the data that we have available now suggest that the phenomenon was present in the church well before the 1960s.⁴⁰

Conversely, Francis's criticism of an overly clerical culture as the cause of the crisis fails to consider the fact that abuse has also taken place in countries that, following Vatican II, were quick to adopt a more lay-friendly mentality and to facilitate lay involvement in the church rather swiftly and efficiently (e.g., certain dioceses in Germany or the United States). Also, as Francis himself has reminded us, the fact that sexual abuse of minors is not confined to the church means that while clericalism has played an important role in perpetrating and silencing these crimes, it would be a mistake to view it as the chief cause and to

40. For more on the historical nature of abuse, see, e.g., Desmond Cahill and Peter Wilkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: An Interpretive Review of the Literature and Public Inquiry Reports* (Melbourne: RMIT University, 2017), 192–3, including references. I am grateful to Professor Cahill for bringing this study to my attention.

lay the blame for moral decadence among some church leaders simply on poor ecclesial structures.

What is missing in each pope's analysis is a reference to the level of his own responsibility in covering up past abuse cases. Victims of abuse often indicate that they do not expect from church leaders any more general apologies for what other churchmen have done, but a personal acknowledgment of what role, if any, they themselves have played in the process of covering up crimes against minors. Questions have been asked about the level of personal responsibility of Cardinal Ratzinger in handling the abuse cases of which the Vatican knew at the time of his tenure as the prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. Also, questions have been asked about Cardinal Bergoglio's involvement in the 2010 case of Fr Julio Grassi in the Diocese of Buenos Aires and about his knowledge as Pope about the accusations and sanctions raised against the former cardinal, Theodore McCarrick. All sociological, psychological or theological analyses of the abuse crisis by the popes would be more helpful and hopeful if they were accompanied by clear statements regarding their own personal participation in handling these and other cases of abuse. Leaving such questions unanswered leads to conspiracy theories, hearsay, suspicions and accusations against not only those church leaders who failed but, through unfair and unjustified generalisations, also against those who did not fail. Concealment also does not help in creating an atmosphere of transparency and trust that would bring about the 'new beginning' that everyone rightfully desires.

Conclusion and Lessons for the Future

The Catholic Church in Australia and the church universal can learn some important ecclesiological lessons from Francis's and Benedict's approaches to the clerical sexual abuse of minors. These lessons can be learned from what the popes have stated and what they have not. They can be valuable not only in the context of scandal itself, but also in reflecting on the general ways of being a church in the twenty-first century.

Francis's analysis reminds the church that if it is to learn from past mistakes, it must become a more dialogical, self-reflecting and self-examining community of believers, clerical and lay alike. It should never be afraid to exercise a healthy dose of self-criticism and humility, and should reject forms of false triumphalism that sometimes penetrate teachings and pastoral practices. Clericalism, which is perhaps the most obvious form of such triumphalism, can have many faces, and extolling the people who are ordained over those who are not is only one of them. The sense of power and dominion that some prelates seem to believe they possess over the church's doctrine, liturgy and moral teaching is also a form of abuse of a position of influence. Understood in its deepest dimensions, clericalism is an offspring of pride and an overgrown concern with self-importance. As such, it should be tackled not only on the level of symptoms but

also on the level of causes. The ultimate cause of clericalism is the failure to pursue the Christian ideal of holiness through prayer, careful and mature formation of conscience, and a personal dedication to the cause of the kingdom of God. Thus, while the process of screening and training candidates for priesthood and other members of the church working with children should indeed include important considerations from the fields of psychology and sociology, it should primarily be based on a solid formation in spirituality and theology. Including competent Catholic laity in this process is one way to tackle problematic church internal practices that sometimes lack clarity and the necessary transparency. While this lay involvement cannot guarantee greater accountability, it does increase the likelihood of improvement in this regard.⁴¹

This means that the church should be open to the promptings of the Spirit coming not only through the ministry of the pastors, but also through the life and experience of the faithful more generally. The church should also remember that useful critical voices can come not only from within, but also from a well-intended without. Ecclesiastical structures in most places failed to manage the sexual abuse crisis caused by the clerics and an intervention from the outside was needed to supplement what was lacking in the church resolution processes. This necessity of secular interventions should always serve as reminder that apart from the divine element of the church present in her midst through the person of her founder and sustainer, there is also a human element that is open, and even prone, to flaws and corruption. While Francis does not use the expressions ‘social sin’ or ‘institutional sin’ when discussing church structures, he does acknowledge, more than his predecessors, ‘unconscious and unintentional dimensions that are operative in the church’s social practices and structures’ that contribute to aggravating the personal sinful inclinations of individual members of the church.⁴²

The church, therefore, needs to be pragmatic and flexible in areas of operation in which flexibility is permitted and potentially useful. Not everything in ecclesiastical structures dropped down from heaven in the form in which it exists now and the church should not be afraid of changes out of principle. Francis’s ecclesiology reminds us that shaping this human, changeable element of the church is a task that should be undertaken with caution, but also with faith and courage in divine guidance. Assistance in framing this temporary dimension of the church can occur not only through internal consultations, but also through openness to voices from outside the visible church. These voices can sometimes come from civil offices and authorities, other Christian denominations or even non-Christian religious groups that struggle with similar problems. The church

41. See Jason King, ‘Vatican II’s Ecclesiology and the Sexual Abuse Scandal’, in *Vatican II: Forty Years Later*, ed. William Madges (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 145–62, at 158–9 and 153, where he refers to George Weigel, *The Courage to Be Catholic* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 102–4.

42. Hinze, ‘Ecclesiology of Pope Francis’, 19–23.

should not be afraid to use this kind of assistance and advice since ‘the seeds of truth’ are present also outside her visible boundaries. Sometimes it takes ‘foreign prophets’ to remind the church about God, his righteousness and ways in which it should be pursued.⁴³

With regard to benefits to be gained from Benedict’s response, one of the main lessons is the importance of personal conversion and individual responsibility of the members of the church. This responsibility relates not only to moral conduct, but also to the obligation to remain faithful to the mission and heritage of the church. The church has a rich doctrinal, theological and moral patrimony and it is the duty of all followers of Christ to protect, preserve and pass this on to the next generations. Without denying the importance of structural changes, Benedict reminds his readers that remaking the church according to contemporary trends can never be successful since the church receives her mission and identity not from even the best intended efforts of her members, but from God. Despite the many imperfections and the constant need for repentance and purification, the church should never be afraid to remain an uncompromising beacon in proclaiming the Gospel in its fullness to the world. It should be courageous in its faithfulness to Christ and should not be afraid of being countercultural when needed. The role of saints, who through their life of devotion to this rich Catholic patrimony witness to Christ and his Gospel in the most authentic way, is vital in this process. It is precisely through their life that the church undergoes successful change and necessary reform. Vatican II’s teaching of the universal call to holiness of all the faithful is yet to take roots in the Catholic consciousness more fully.

Benedict has admitted that the church has her own faults and Catholics should not spare effort to address them. However, Catholics’ critical and discerning approach should not be limited to the church’s self-criticism, and the failings of the church should not stop her members from retaining a critical look at what is happening ‘on the outside’. Catholics might feel tempted to refrain from criticising ‘the world’ and taking strong positions on important issues due to an embarrassing lack of credibility of their own institution. However, Benedict reminds the church that even if she is broken and failing, she is not excused from exercising her mandate of critically examining the spirit of the times. While it might be easy to give in to the temptation to remain silent and to ‘[sort] out the Church’s own problems before lecturing others how to live’, the church must not give in to this temptation. The main reason for this is that the mandate of the church to live and proclaim the Gospel is not an addition to her identity: it is situated at her very core. It comes from God and God can use even very faulty tools for his work in the world.⁴⁴

43. Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx’s idea of *Fremdprophetie* discussed at Tracey Rowland, *Catholic Theology* (London: Bloomsberg, 2017), 152–4.

44. Austin Ivereigh, ‘Pope Benedict’s Letter on Sex Abuse Is Not an Attack on Francis (or Vatican II)’, *America*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/04/11/pope->

Therefore, the advice of Benedict for the church is to continue to be critical towards contemporary culture and not yield to its whims and fashions, which, if not critically investigated, might harm the world and even contaminate the church from within, as they have in the past. The church should not be afraid to be more than simply an echo of contemporary lifestyles and should always remain steadfast in proclaiming and living the liberating character of Christ's paschal mystery, even if it sometimes fails to practice what it preaches, and fails badly. This is because only in the church, even if broken and disfigured by the sins of its members, can we find the living Christ present in his Word and sacraments.

Through the work of the Plenary Council, the Catholic Church in Australia wishes to discern the Holy Spirit's message to her early in the twenty-first century. Listening to the responses of the current and previous popes to clerical sexual abuse could be a useful exercise in this process of discernment. It is certainly not easy to pursue these two non-identical paths simultaneously, even if these paths share more similarities than differences. However, one of the most important characteristics of the Catholic tradition is that it is not an 'either/or', but a 'both/and' tradition. The phenomenon of tensions and multiplicity of approaches is not unknown to the church and rather than being viewed as a problem of two 'rival ecclesiologies', it should be perceived as an opportunity for improvement and enrichment.

In the midst of the horrible reality of abuse of minors in the church, in Popes Francis and Benedict, we are given two visions of the kind of church we should be in future—visions that are not identical, but that are nevertheless complementary. It is to be hoped that the church in Australia and the church universal will be willing and able to learn useful lessons from both these approaches and become a more credible witness to the Gospel in the twenty-first century.

benedicts-letter-sex-abuse-not-attack-francis-or-vatican-ii. Ivereigh links the tendencies of purifying the church and leaving in it only those who are morally immaculate with the Donatist crisis in the fourth and fifth centuries.